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ABSTRACT

The news media are finally seeking ways to portray African-Americans and the nation's other minorities more accurately. Media executives are realizing that within the next several decades the audience for the media and the pool of potential media employees will be increasingly multi-ethnic. To make reporting more accurate, newspapers must include minorities in all coverage of issues concerning the population in general. A news staff can compile a data base of a wide variety of minority persons having expertise in various subjects. The media should avoid perpetuating stereotypes and should use anecdotes that counter stereotypes. The media should regularly run features about black culture and history, and should cover the forces that still deny equality to minorities. The media must recognize racism as a component of the problems facing minority groups and promote good relations between ethnic groups. Besides illuminating problems, the media should present solutions. More minority reporters should be brought into the mainstream media, and the knowledge and sensitivity of white journalists should be broadened. Lines of communication should be opened between the media and minority communities. Journalism educators have a vital role to play in helping bring about such changes and must make a stronger effort to interest minority students in journalism careers. (SG)

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Improving Images of African-Americans in the Media

by Carolyn Martindale

During the past few years the in-house publications of various newspaper chains and press associations have begun to mention newspapers holding multi-cultural sensitivity sessions for editors and, more recently, for reporters. About two years ago the management of USA Today informed reporters that they were to try to bring a multi-cultural perspective to every story. This month the Scripps Howard employees' magazine included a first-of-a-kind article about how papers can bring cultural and racial diversity to their news columns. A few seminars on this topic have been offered recently at newspaper conventions around the country.

These few straws in the wind are the first indications that the nation's news media are finally embarking on a course of action urged on them 23 years ago--namely, to seek ways to provide more accurate and representative portrayal of African-Americans and the nation's other minorities.

The Kerner Commission, appointed by President Johnson to investigate the causes of the urban riots, issued its report in 1968. In its section on the media, it urged them to begin providing more comprehensive and unbiased coverage of the lives of African-Americans, and also urged the hiring of more black Americans and other minorities.

The mainstream news media largely ignored the Kerner report

for a decade, and then made a public commitment to the second part of the commission's recommendation--to bring more minorities into their newsrooms. That effort has very slowly increased the number of minorities employed in newsrooms from less than 1 percent in 1968 to about 9 percent now.

Only in the last few years, however, have the few signs mentioned earlier indicated that mainstream newspapers are finally beginning to try to train their white reporters (who are, of course, the overwhelming majority) how to do a better job of covering minorities. Some papers, especially the Gannett ones, are even making editors and reporters accountable for covering minorities more knowledgeably and senstively.

The impetus for this change, one suspects, is the Workforce 2000 report and the reality it heralds. News media executives are realizing that within the next several decades the society their media cover will be increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic, as will the pool of journalists from which they will draw their employees. Equally important, if newspapers and other media are to survive, they must appeal to and attract multi-racial and multi-ethnic audiences, which most media have not had to seriously attempt thus far.

Those facts provide a potent inspiration for media executives to try to insure that all reporters, not just minority reporters, are equipped to do a better job of covering minorities. It looks as though the news media are finally going to begin covering black Americans and other minorities more fairly, not because it is right, but because it is becoming

necessary to their survival.

Whatever the reason, however, this slow increase in attempts to improve media coverage of minorities is a welcome phenomenon. Jesse Jackson once claimed that the media portray African-Americans as "less intelligent, less hardworking, more violent and less universal" than they really are. After many years of study of press portrayal of black Americans, I would agree with his assessment, and would keep it in mind when outlining four particular improvements that should be made in media coverage of black Americans.

These changes include providing more accurate and representative coverage of African-Americans, less stereotypical coverage, more coverage of black achievements and contributions and more coverage of problems facing black Americans. Before discussing how these changes would be achieved, I would like to explore each of these ideas in more detail.

Concerning more accurate and representative coverage, all newspapers need to attempt, as USA Today is doing, to include blacks and other minorities in all their coverage of issues concerning the population in general. Reporters seeking opinions from the general public should make sure minority persons are included, and stories using examples from ordinary people's lives should be sure that their examples include people from racial and ethnic minorities. When quotes from experts are used, black experts should be sought. This is especially important, of course, when the issue concerns race.

Several years ago Kirk Johnson, a Boston journalist,

analyzed coverage of black Americans in Boston's black and white media outlets. He found that the white media seldom used as sources blacks who were in positions of authority or who had special expertise, even on stories that clearly involved race. On a story concerning black students' test scores, for instance, the reporters went to white authorities on education, not to the city school superintendent, who was black, or to the four minority members of the Boston School Committee. This kind of ignorance of, or failure to consult, knowledgeable sources within the minority community is common in newspapers across the nation.

One solution is for a news staff to compile a source book or data base of a wide variety of minority persons who have special knowledge on various subjects and who could be consulted as sources or could direct reporters to other sources. This list should be constantly expanded, and the news medium should avoid the pitfall of using a few persons as spokespersons for a whole minority community.

Another useful idea is for the newspaper to insure that photos and art illustrations reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the readership area, just as the stories about matters concerning the general public should include minority persons.

Concerning the aim of running less stereotypical coverage, the media should scrupulously avoid overplaying items that perpetuate stereotypical images of African-Americans--the black athlete, entertainer or criminal. The aim is not to fail to cover news of this sort, but to cover it the same as it would be

covered if the persons were white. To go a step further, it would be valid to cease running descriptions of at-large subjects that are so general they are meaningless, such as "the suspect is a black male in his mid-twenties and about six feet tall."

Along the same lines, the media should avoid using images of black Americans to illustrate stories about welfare mothers, drug users, convicts and other such roles. Besides reinforcing stereotypes, often these images are not even valid.

Ron Wade, assistant managing editor of the Minneapolis Star Tribune, has pointed out that the typicl welfare mother in this country is a 28-year-old white woman with two children. Also, not all drug use in the U.S. occurs in inner city crack houses, he said, noting that 80 percent of the cocaine use in America is by whites, many of them suburbanites. Citing the often-heard statistic that 20 percent of African-American men become involved with the justice system and are at some point in their lives in jail, on probation or on parole, he noted that this means that 80 percent of black American men aren't ever involved with the law, and it is their lives that are underrepresented in the news media.

Reporters should be encouraged to use examples and anecdotes that counter stereotypes. Chicago Tribune reporter George Curry said that he attempted to make readers think twice about their assumptions when he was assigned to do a story about people's opinions about the welfare system. He used quotes from, among others, an affluent black woman from the suburbs and a white woman on welfare. His also was a suggestion for reporters to go

to the black Muslims, who have a very successful drug rehabilitation program, for information about approaches to drug rehabilitation.

Another kind of stereotype that reporters need to beware perpetuating is the portrayal of black inner-city neighborhoods as places abandoned to crime, poverty, drugs and despair. Johnson, the Boston journalist mentioned earlier, reported that his study showed that such images were the only visions of Boston's largest black communities the white media of Boston presented. Yet Boston's black media outlets also reported equally important facts about these same black neighborhoods--such as efforts at educational improvement, successes of black entrepreneurs, efforts at civic beautification, even the participation of Boston's mayor in a hands-on clean-up campaign.

The author noted that positive events that would be regarded as news had they occurred in white communities are ignored by the white media of Boston when they occur in the city's black communities, while negative news like drug abuse is reported as if it were solely a black phenomenon. He added that although Boston's two largest black communities accounted for only 7 percent of the crime news presented in Boston's major media during a month, 59 percent of all the news presented <u>about</u> those two communities was about crime. This is the kind of unthinking perpetuation of stereootypes that more sensitive news media must work to avoid.

Related to providing more accurate and responsible coverage

is seeking out the good news, about minorities and about relations between racial and ethnic groups. The media can actively seek minority persons to profile regularly in the same kind of features they run routinely about whites--features on persons who have started their own business, who are creative in some way, who are engaged in serving others in an unusual way, or who for some other reason are interesting subjects for stories.

The media also can seek to report examples of interracial cooperation as well as instances of hostility and trouble between groups. They also can show the contributions of African-Americans and other minority groups to the history, government, music, arts, language, food, technological progress and other aspects of the U.S. Reporters will need to try to get past their Eurocentric perspective about this country, and should try to enlarge their audience's consciousness too.

The media should regularly run features about black culture, history and contributions to the U.S., and provide the same kind of information about other groups that comprise American society also. Only in such ways will readers and viewers from these groups begin to be convinced that perhaps the mainstream media are interested in covering their activities and concerns as well as those of the white community.

Finally, the media must begin to provide better coverage of the forces that still deny equality to African-Americans and other minority groups. They need to shatter the belief, held by many middle-class white Americans, that all barriers to black equality were removed by the civil rights movement of the '60s.

(Even if that had been true, much of the civil rights legislation passed during the '60s has been eviscerated in the past decade.)

Covering the problems facing black Americans does not mean running the occasional story about black infant mortality and teenage pregnancy nationwide. It means showing readers and viewers why it is fallacious to believe, as many do, that that inner city black youths who do not have jobs do so choice, because they don't want to work. It means providing an unvarnished picture of the problems facing blacks and other minorities in the media's own community. It means illuminating the problems of all economic classes of minorities--the people in the inner cities, the migrants, and even the middle class, whose lives are more comfortable but who still face discrimination in their attempts to purchase homes, to take out loans, to obtain promotions.

Also it is important for the media to be willing to admit the presence of racism as a component of the problems facing minority groups. The Boston journalist mentioned earlier said that he found 15 news stories in the mainstream media that had unmistakeable links to racism. In nine of these the importance of racism as an underlying factor was not explored or not even acknowledged, he said. This situation, he suggested, was less a deliberate omission than a reflection of the white middle-class orientation of most reporters working for Boston's major media outlets. Not having experienced racism, he implied, the white reporters would be less likely to recognize it and report its existence.

Finally, besides illuminating problems, the media also should present solutions. Various approaches to solving the problems portrayed should be offered, and the solutions should be not be limited to those propounded by government experts and other official sources. Reporters could serve a valuable role by talking with the persons most directly affected by the problems and getting their suggestions for remedies before the public eye.

How can changes like this be made in media coverage of minorities? The most obvious method, and the one the mainstream media have been pursuing for years, is to bring more minority reporters into the media. This is an important endeavor, but has been proceeding with glacial slowness, partly because of the small pool of minority students interested in entering journalism.

If the attempt to hire more minority reporters is to succeed, both news organizations and journalism schools are going to have to make a stronger effort to interest minority students in journalism careers while the students are still in junior high school, or even earlier. The college-bound students often have already chosen a career path by the time they enter high school, and other potential minority journalists abandon the idea of finishing high school before they are ever out of junior high. Local newspapers and university journalism programs could join forces to reach out to youngsters in their communities to inform them about career opportunities in journalism.

So many job fairs, scholarships and internship opportunities for minority journalism students abound that a journalism

graduate will not have much difficulty finding a job on a newspaper if he or she is competent. But what soon discourages young minority reporters, and eventually leads many of them to leave the journalism field, they say, is a "glass ceiling" above which they cannot rise. They state that minorities, like women, are seldom promoted to editorships and management positions. Employment statistics bear out this complaint.

Naturally the presence of minority journalists in a newsroom tends to sensitize white reporters and perhaps may enlarge their awareness and lead them to new sources. But not until minorities obtain editorships are they in a position to influence coverage decisions, to determine what gets covered and how it is played. White media managers who truly want their media to do a better job of covering minorities are going to have to be more willing to share editorial power with minorities, women and others who can provide a slightly different perspective on coverage.

Providing more representative coverage of minorities also requires broadening the knowledge and sensitivity of the reporters who are in the majority--the white journalists. Media with a commitment to better minority coverage have already begun working in this area, and the effort should be expanded to all media. Sensitivity sessions that alert reporters to stereotypes they should avoid perpetuating, that help them avoid racist and sexist writing, that inform them of how their medium is viewed in minority communities are helpful, but they are not enough. Reporters need more than sensitivity; they also need to be informed.

Media managers need to arrange to bring to their inter-cultural training sessions minority experts who can inform reporters and editors of the organizations and problems and issues within minority communities, who can explain the demographics of the area's racial and ethnic make-up, who can put reporters in touch with a whole range of different sources within the minority community, from high school students to black Muslims to school superintendents to Urban League officials, for example, in an African-American community.

Another step in improving a medium's minority coverage involves opening lines of communication between the medium and the minority community. The kinds of training sessions mentioned above can be a good first step in this endeavor. If the informational sessions for reporters and editors are on-going, they can form the basis for a dialogue. Some news media have instituted minority advisory panels through which members of the minority community can critique coverage, suggest stories and provide information.

Another useful technique is for the medium to run periodic polls of its minority readers or listeners to learn which of the medium's coverage they find most useful or entertaining, what they would like to see more of and what changes or story ideas they might suggest.

Along these lines, media managers should be aware that as they begin to try to provide better coverage of minorities, and the minority commmunity becomes aware of these efforts, the medium may begin to hear more criticism of their coverage of

minorities than they did in the days when they were perceived as indifferent to minorities. This at first may seem a discouraging word, but what it indicates is that some persons in the minority community are noticing the medium's efforts and see the medium as now being willing to take criticisms seriously. The medium needs to do just that, and continue its efforts to expand and improve its minority coverage.

Finally, the effort to provide more realistic portrayals of the nation's racial and ethnic minorities must be expanded to include the education of journalism students in colleges and universities. These students, just like professional journalists at commercial newspapers and broadcasting outlets, must be trained to greater sensitivity in racial and ethnic issues and must be informed about the minority components of and contributions to American society. Students working at college newspapers and radio and TV stations should be encouraged to insure that their medium's coverage reflects the diversity of the student body and faculty. Journalism and communications faculty have an obligation to include this kind of training, if they are going to adequately prepare students for working in, and covering, the multi-racial, multi-ethnic world of the 21st Century.

Ever since the establishment of the first American newspaper 300 years ago, American communications media have largely ignored the presence and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities in this country, and have presented viciously biased coverage when they did focus on minorities. This situation began to change

only 30 years ago, with the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, and the change is now beginning to accelerate as demographic predictions indicate the growing numbers and potency of minority groups in American society. These new efforts to improve coverage are encouraging and exciting. Even more encouraging is the fact that we as journalism educators have a vital role to play in helping this long-overdue change come about.

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